
Microsoft is offering a reward of \$250,000 to help bring the creator of a nasty computer worm to justice. The computer code, known as Conficker or Downadup, has spread to millions of computers worldwide threatening to crash systems. Maggie Shiels reports:

Microsoft says people who write this **malware** have **to be held accountable** and know the company **will not let this kind of activity go unchecked**. George Stathakapoulos, the general manager of its trustworthy computing group, says "our message is very clear - whoever wrote this **caused significant pain to** our customers and we are sending a message that we will do everything we can to help with your arrest".

Since the **malicious** program was discovered in October 2008, it's estimated that as many as 12 million computers have been affected globally. The Conficker worm is a **self-replicating** program that **takes advantage of** networks or computers that have not kept up to date with Windows **security patches**. It can infect machines from the internet or by hiding on USB memory sticks, carrying data from one computer to another. The worm **slithers through** networks by guessing usernames and passwords.

Security specialists recommend **hardening** passwords by mixing in numbers, punctuation marks and upper case letters.

Maggie Shiels, BBC News, Silicon Valley

Vocabulary and definitions

malware	a computer virus, i.e. a program that has been designed to stop affected computers working properly
to be held accountable	here, to take responsibility and be punished
will not let this kind of activity go unchecked	here, will make sure that creators of computer viruses are found, monitored and, if necessary, stopped and punished
caused significant pain to	here, made computers stop working properly and therefore seriously affected (the customers)
malicious	intended to harm or upset
self-replicating	that can make copies of itself
takes advantage of	makes use of, affects
security patches	programs specially created by computer companies to protect their product from viruses
slithers through	easily moves around/crosses
hardening	here, making more difficult to guess

More on this story: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/7887577.stm>

Read and listen to the story and the vocabulary online:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/newsenglish/witn/2009/02/090213_microsoft.shtml